

Cleanup of homes under way in Libby

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LIBBY — The first residential cleanups are beginning as the Environmental Protection Agency's project to screen more than 3,000 Libby-area homes for asbestos contamination nears the halfway point.

About 10 two-person teams from the environmental engineering firm CDM Inc. have visited more than 1,400 properties looking for asbestos-contaminated vermiculite in the ground or in attic insulation, EPA on-scene coordinator Paul Peronard said.

CDM has a contract with the federal agency to conduct the screening.

"The basic purpose of this is to cue up the obvious stuff and eliminate the obvious nonstarters," Peronard said.

So far, 133 homes have been identified with vermiculite insulation but no other source of contamination, 423 have visible vermiculite outdoors but not in the insulation, and 137 have both. Another nine properties have vermiculite insulation in an outbuilding or secondary structure.

"Overall, that's a little higher than we expected," Peronard said.

Houses with Zonolite brand vermiculite insulation, vermiculite in the yard or garden, or asbestos

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contamination in household dust move to the top of the list for cleanup.

"We call them our priority homes," Peronard said.

The number of homes with vermiculite insulation is lower than expected, but the presence of vermiculite outdoors is higher than predicted, Peronard said. Initial projections called for the cleanup of about 800 homes and 100 businesses.

"If you project out right now you're looking at over 1,000 cleanups," Peronard said.

Removal of vermiculite attic insulation began at one house on Monday. Except for several pilot projects, it's the first house to be cleaned of insulation. About 50 houses are scheduled to be cleaned up this year.

At the county landfill near Libby, 13 individual cells, each 18 feet deep, are being prepared to hold up to 130,000 cubic yards of vermiculite insulation

removed from homes.

The insulation will be removed using a vacuum truck and double bagged before being placed in the landfill. Contaminated soil will be taken to the former W.R. Grace vermiculite mine for disposal.